

In Montgomery, Teamwork Trumps Tough Times

By Council President Steve Silverman

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Times have been tough in Maryland. Baltimore County proposed to slash its capital budget from \$66 million last year to \$1 million this year.

Howard County put a freeze on hiring police and firefighters, gave no cost-of-living raise to county workers and dipped into its "Rainy Day" fund.

But in Montgomery County--which in December was looking at a \$250 million deficit--a budget was approved last week that increases spending by 6.4 percent, fully funds the schools budget and moves ahead on more roads and more transit. And it happened without an increase in the income tax or the property tax rate.

How did we do it?

Well, revenues improved from December--but they improved elsewhere as well. The difference came down to teamwork.

Recognizing the impending threat last fall, the county council, the county executive and the school system came together. The council asked the county executive for a plan to save money in what remained of this fiscal year, and he came through with \$30 million in savings. The school system took a hard look at its capital and operating budgets and painfully separated needs from wants. A full-court press in Annapolis yielded more than \$8 million in new funding for a school system in which 23 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals.

In place of the usual election-year posturing, Montgomery County focused on problem-solving.

Problem One: We needed more resources to relieve traffic congestion.

Answer: We approved an impact tax on developers with the proceeds put back into congestion relief and matched dollar-for-dollar by county government. The result is that we will double county spending on transportation in the coming years.

Problem Two: We needed to fill holes in our school construction budget to keep pace with a growing student population.

Answer: We approved an increase in the recordation tax people pay when transferring property. But we made the tax progressive and actually reduced it on all properties selling for less than \$138,000--purchases made by the working poor and young couples just starting out. The recordation measure still will net an additional \$115 million over six years for school construction and critical technology needs at Montgomery College.

Problem Three: We needed to restore proposed cuts in transit programs for commuters and health and human services programs.

Answer: We went into the budget and tightened the proverbial belt to free several million dollars. We approved the introduction of advertising on county Ride-On buses, netting another half-million.

As a result, we saved our "Fare Share" program that works with businesses to encourage their employees to use transit. We saved reduced-fare bus routes along the I-270 corridor that have taken cars off the road and expanded that program to congested Route 29 in the eastern part of the county. And we were able to put money back into programs that serve "at-risk" kids, into meal delivery and escorted transportation for seniors and into case management for children with special needs.

Benjamin Franklin once advised his fellow Founding Fathers:
"If we do not hang together, we shall surely hang separately."

Montgomery County saw the wisdom of Franklin's words. I hope we remember them the next time around.